

Title: **The Heart is the Last Thing to Go**

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Chapter 1: The Heart is the Last Thing to Go

His voice crept over her shoulder like water through the air, brushing against her skin, icy cold and drowning in doubt and darkness. "Clara."

She turned her head slightly, her eyes flickering to meet his face from the corner of her eye. Eyes the color of frozen earth weighed against her like a fist around her heart. Her daemon shivered, and pressed his trembling ribs into her leg, his head bowed low to the ground. He'd been proud once, his fur golden and shining. A coyote at home in the scorching California heat. Now his fur was tainted grey with darkness, and falling out in patches. Scars crisscrossed every visible inch of his skin, the only proof to the life they'd suffered through. The thought came, unbidden and unwanted.

Why was she still here?

She buried it before the pain could take root, and her

daemon trembled as though his heart were freezing from the inside out. She shoved the pain away.

She couldn't deal with the what-ifs. She'd tried that once already. And he'd torn it away from her.

The words came like a softly spoken demand, drawing her attention back to him. Always back to him. A whisper in her ear even with the distance between them. Like oil against her skin. "Tell me. Am I a good man?" The sounds flew past her, and she could almost reach out her fingertips to touch them path they drew through the air. Every inch of her ached to escape once more into the confines of her mind. To escape the world.

To escape him.

But the command was there, underlying the sounds and shredding at her resolve.

She closed her eyes, and felt the memories wash over her. One stood out the sharpest, the clearest. The fog hung itself lightly over it, fading it, but not erasing it entirely. Terror. Pain. Fear. Metallic voices screaming all around her and ringing in her ears. She could still feel the heat of the explosion. Could still feel the *horror* that had wrapped itself around her heart and clawed itself out her throat in a scream until the blast ripped her voice away from her and shattered her into darkness. She could still feel the whisper of their deaths; voices against the edges of her skin, begging someone to save them. Their fear, their confusion, their pain. It hung there in her mind like a weight she would never be able to dispel. Her hands curled

themselves into fists and her fingernails cut into the skin of her palms as she fought against the tide of remembered fear and pain rushing around her. Blood welled up and ran like a warm river through her fingers, and dripped onto her daemon's fur.

She opened her eyes to find tears blurring her vision, and turned away from his desperately searching gaze.

"No," She whispered, staring at the floor and feeling again the weight of the chains that had trapped her in place even as he ran from her, abandoning her to the inferno, "No, I—I don't think so." Her voice shook with the weight of her pain as her daemon's frame was once more wracked with tremors. Her chest felt cold, and her lungs struggled to take in each breath that passed her lips. Maybe her heart was freezing, after all.

It wouldn't be the first time. But maybe it could be the last.

Grief stung his words, and they stabbed at her skin like needles. Shattering the ice. She wasn't even allowed numbness. "I'm sorry." He whispered.

But words would never be enough.

And they both knew it.